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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN MEDIA REACTION TO RUSSIAN RECOGNITION OF ABKHAZIA
AND SOUTH OSSETIA INDEPENDENCE

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SUMMARY

¶11. SUMMARY: Armenian media widely covered Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's August 26 decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While first reports were strictly factual, by August 27 Armenian media offered lengthy editorials. Most Armenian press focused on how this decision will affect Armenian-Russian, Armenian-Georgian and Armenian-Turkish relations, as well as drawing parallels between South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh (NK).

The following presents a summary of local press reports and reaction, as well as CDA's response to local press on the issue. Official GOAM reaction to Russia's move is reported septel. END SUMMARY.

RUSSIA CROSSED THE RUBICON

¶12. Pro-government HAYOTS ASHKHAR (circulation 3,500) writes that by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has "repeated what the U.S. and its allies accomplished in Iraq and Kosovo." The newspaper asserts that, at present, Russia has assumed the role of a "student who repeats the actions of the United States" and that the U.S. has "assumed the role of a critic who criticizes the actions that they themselves took several years ago."

A WAVE OF REGIONAL CHANGE

¶13. Centrist daily AZG (circulation 3,000) notes that Medvedev's decision to recognize these self-declared states will start a wave of change both in the CIS and in world politics. "Obviously," it states, "neither the EU nor the United States will follow Russia's example in recognizing independence, although Medvedev advised them to do so." According to the paper, it is also obvious that a "new phenomenon has begun in international relations, that of the 'semi-recognized' state." The paper states that, "Regardless of Europe and America's position, it is they who started it. It is they who, breaking with international protocol of recognizing new sovereign states, recognized the independence of Kosovo." The newspaper further notes that there is "still something positive about this matter for Armenia: From now on Armenia's recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence will not be as strange as it might have been before these events. However, in such circumstances the role of Armenia in the region is growing. Armenia will become more important not only because of being the only stable state in the South Caucasus, but also because of becoming an alternative way for the West to reach the energy sources of the Caspian. This is why the opening of the border with Armenia is becoming more and more important for Turkey, as transportation through Georgia will not be

reliable any more. Two days ago George W. Bush made a statement urging Russia not to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The decision of Dmitry Medvedev showed the world that statements from the White House are not as influential as they used to be."

RUSSIAN POLITICAL LEVERAGE

14. Opposition daily ARAVOT (circulation 4,100) editorializes, "It is obvious that no Western country will follow the example of Russia; moreover, the relations of influential countries with Russia will drastically worsen. Let's put aside the analysis of this whole development and try to understand what Armenia should do in this situation: It goes without saying that Russia will try to force its allies to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia has a number of leverages it can use on Armenia. If you don't recognize independence we will cut your gas, will deprive you of gasoline and will arm Azerbaijan." The article adds, "Ignoring Russia's coercive measures will bring disastrous consequences. But it will be equally dangerous for Armenia to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as it will mean spoiling relations with Georgia. Georgia might even close all its roads with Armenia. By recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia we will not be able to maintain our relations with Europe and the United States. And last but not least, by recognizing the independence of these two countries and not recognizing the independence of NK, Armenia will put itself in an awkward situation.

Recognizing NK's independence will mean stopping the Minsk Group process and preparing for military action. The only thing Armenia can do is to beg Russian authorities to understand them and not to impose anything on them. But the Russians will hardly respect this request."

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ARMENIA BETWEEN TWO ROCKS AND A HARD PLACE

15. Opposition daily HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK (circulation 4,840) states that on August 26, the Armenian Foreign Ministry refused to comment on the decision of the Russian president, saying that Armenia's position on the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence will be announced at a later time. In this situation, the newspaper concludes, Armenia appears to be between "three stones," stating, "On the one hand it cannot welcome the decision of Russia, as it will mean spoiling relations with Georgia. On the other hand, Armenia cannot criticize the decision of the Kremlin and in addition, it will be hard for Armenia not to welcome the recognition of these two unrecognized states as NK is on the same level with South Ossetia and Abkhazia." The paper then notes, "This situation is complicated for the most experienced diplomats, but for an MFA with diplomats of the Shavarsh-Kocharian type this issue is unsolvable." The newspaper also quotes political scientist Aghasi Yenokian, who describes the decision of Russia as "desperate" and adds that this will "deepen the confrontation of Russia with the rest of the world." According to Yenokian, the recognition of NK's independence will mean a resumption of military action. The head of the Caucasus Institute and political scientist Aleksandr Iskandarian opined that "the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia does not mean that these states will be recognized internationally." He noted that he believes that Armenia's recognition of NK would not change the settlement process.

JOURNALISTS EAGER FOR U.S. EMBASSY RESPONSE

16. Official government paper HAYASTANI HANRAPETUTIUN (circulation 6,000) reports that yesterday, during an event, journalists questioned CDA Pennington on the U.S. response to the conflict. The paper quotes the CDA as stating that, "The latest crisis in the region shows the importance of opening the border and restoring economic and diplomatic ties between Armenia and Turkey," adding that, "The U.S. supports Georgia's territorial integrity. The

conflicting sides, especially Russia, must meet the commitments of the cease-fire regime." Asked whether the recent events in the region may affect Armenian-Azeri relations, CDA said, "We saw the tragic outcome of the Georgian-Russian conflict, which should serve as a good lesson that there is nothing to be gained from military actions." HAYOTS ASHKHAR, AZG and ARAVOT also covered CDA's comments.

PENNINGTON